

# Scotland and Northern Ireland council and National Health Service workers in growing pay battle

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Tens of thousands of local authority workers in Scotland and Northern Ireland are striking, planning to strike or balloting against sub-inflation pay offers. The disputes are driven by soaring living costs.

Local authority workers are entering the fray simultaneously with the wildcat walkouts at the huge Grangemouth oil refinery in Scotland and elsewhere, and at Amazon depots across the UK as disputes involving hundreds of thousands of communication, health, education and transport workers break out.

In all some 250,000 workers are employed by Scottish councils. The pay claim submitted by the three trade unions in the Scottish Joint Council (SJC) Unite, Unison and the GMB, in January called for a flat rate £3,000 pay increase, a minimum of £12 an hour, based on the then RPI rate of inflation of 7.1 percent. This claim amounts to real terms pay cut, as RPI is now 11.8 percent with predictions of its reaching 17 percent by the end of 2022.

The employers, the Councils of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) and the Scottish government, are offering a mere £9.98 an hour minimum, no flat rate increase and allowances to be increased by 2 percent. CoSLA said this was in line with a reduction of £251 million in core funding to local government from the Scottish National Party (SNP) government.

The SJC unions are doing everything in their power to prevent a united struggle emerging among council workers, at a time when millions throughout the UK face similar attacks. The union apparatus, deeply integrated into local authority management, seeks to limit workers to fragmented and delayed actions.

The SJC eventually balloted school, nursery and cleansing workers over strike action in June, months after initial negotiations.

On July 27, Unite finally announced that cleansing workers at 26 of 32 Scottish local authorities had voted for strike action. Workers at Tayside Contracts, which contracts

work for Angus, Dundee City and Perth and Kinross, also voted to strike.

Unison reported that its members across Scotland had “overwhelmingly” rejected the employers’ offer and that workers at nine authorities had voted in sufficient numbers to overcome the 50 percent turnout threshold imposed by the anti-strike laws. The GMB reported thousands of members supporting strikes, surpassing the 50 percent threshold in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow cleansing departments, while schools in Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow and Renfrewshire.

Immediately after these ballot results, the SJC wrote in July 27 to CoSLA noting that they now had legal mandates to disrupt the operation of 1,200 schools across 16 local authorities and waste collection across 25 authorities.

Rather than act on votes expressing the determination of council workers to put up a fight, the unions have authorised only two strikes. The first, in Edinburgh, is due to commence August 18 and run for 12 days, to coincide with the latter half of the Edinburgh International and Fringe Festivals, and only 250 workers will be involved. Thereafter, some 1,500 bin workers at a further 15 councils are scheduled currently to strike for a week commencing August 24. According to Unite, “Action specifically impacting schools is expected to begin in early September”.

By dragging everything out, the SJC will seize the any shift in position from CoSLA to justify attempting to call off any further action.

Simultaneous with the council workers ballots, 150,000 National Health Service (NHS) workers in Scotland were balloting until August 8 on an NHS Scotland pay offer of 5 percent and a minimum wage of £10.50. Although the “offer” is vastly below inflation, the unions, well aware that that the offer would be thrown out ensured the ballot was merely “consultative”, meaning that another vote would be required before any action took place. On Friday the votes were published showing significant majorities for industrial

action by Royal College of Nursing, GMB and Unison members. Unite members in Scotland had already backed action is a consultative ballot.

The role of the unions in frustrating their members and delaying any fightback was clear in their response. Unison will finally hold a strike ballot of their 50,000 members in Scotland but only *beginning* in two months' time, on October 3! The RCN's ballot will be held beginning September 15 to October 13. The GMB, despite its members voting by 97 percent to reject the deal has announced nothing. GMB Scotland organiser Karen Leonard instead appealed to the SNP government saying it "must do more to help them [workers] confront the cost-of-living crisis and avoid the prospect of more NHS staff slipping into working poverty this winter."

Referring to SNP Health Secretary Humza Yousaf, she pleaded, "If the minister wants to recruit and retain the people desperately needed to help our NHS recover from the peril it is in, then he must value these key workers better, and particularly those in the lowest pay grades who do not receive the biggest cash increases under this offer." Despite the huge strike mandate any action is to be delayed as long as possible, with Leonard adding, "However, if these hard truths are not recognised and confronted then industrial action affecting NHS services looks inevitable *in the months ahead.*"

Conditions in Northern Ireland are similar in all fundamentals, with the trade unions working systematically to fragment and suppress determined efforts by workers opposing pay cuts.

Council workers across Northern Ireland held a week-long strike in March, which produced no movement from district councils, the suspended Northern Ireland Executive or the British government. Rather than escalate and intensify industrial action and seek a broader base of support among other public and private sector workers, the trade unions are seeking local agreements to assist in breaking up opposition to the miserable 1.75 percent pay offer made for 2021/22 and still not settled.

Of the eleven district councils in Northern Ireland, only workers in Mid Ulster District Council are on strike. Since July 25 Unite members have been striking against an offer the authority claims is an additional 4 percent over 2 years and a one-off payment of £500. The add-ons still bring the combined total to less than inflation.

The Mid Ulster strike involves cleansing and leisure centre workers, who have maintained pickets at depots in Dungannon and Magherafelt. Bin collection has been curtailed across the authority and two leisure centres, at Cookstown and Greenvale are partly closed. The strike is scheduled to end August 21.

Workers at Derry City and Strabane District Council were set to strike for four weeks, starting July 18. Unite members working in cleansing and council venues were demanding a 10 percent increase. But Unite regional official, Gareth Scott conceded that even this sub inflation demand was "up for negotiation". Then, on July 15 the strike was called off "as a matter of good faith" after the district council announced "positive and constructive negotiations" with both NIPSA union members and Unite. Days later, Unite advised its intention to ballot members recommending acceptance of a deal reported in the media as including an offer of as little as a 2.5 percent wage increase, although a one off £1,000 payment had previously been floated.

One thousand workers at Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council have announced they intend to strike from August 15 and "strike action and action short of strike would take place over four weeks." The members of GMB, NIPSA and Unite, who represent 80 percent of the council workforce, are opposing unequal pay rates and seeking redress for the cost-of-living crisis. Strike action has already been called off once.

Belfast City Council is the largest council, employing 2,500 workers. One thousand of these are members of Unite, SIPTU, NIPSA and the GMB and are opposed to the 1.7 percent offer. Yet again the unions are doing everything to demobilise this sentiment. A "union source" told the *Belfast Telegraph* that negotiations were continuing, and that strike action was merely "being considered".

The sabotage of their fight poses workers in Scotland, Northern Ireland and throughout Britain with taking the organisation of their struggle out of the hands of the trade union apparatus.

Not a single step forward can be made within the framework and under the domination of the unions. New organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees that act independently of the trade unions and seek the broadest unity in the working class in the struggle against the capitalist onslaught, are required in every workplace and community.

Workers should contact International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees (IWA-RFC), and join an international network of worker-controlled, democratic organisations based on unifying their fight workers globally based on a socialist programme.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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